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ABSTRACT

This digest explains why public-school governance is receiving increasing scrutiny. It identifies who is held accountable for results in the current governance system and describes recent proposals for transforming governance structures. Since many reforms of the past decade bypassed the school board and district office, reformers are now targeting this neglected middle level of governance, with much of the discussion of governance focusing on the sometimes rocky relationships among teachers, principals, superintendents, and school boards. Some critics wish to change the system entirely, whereas others favor workaround solutions, such as vouchers, choice, and privatization. Most critics, however, recognize that firing the superintendent as a first step is no longer a viable option. The National Commission on Governing America's Schools has recommended two forms of governance: (1) publicly authorized, publicly funded, and publicly operated schools based on promising trends in public-education governance; and (2) publicly authorized, publicly funded, and independently operated schools based on promising alternatives. A few economically based strategies for changes in school governance have also been proposed, such as the creation of basic standards created by states and local boards. Notable among recent developments in school governance has been the takeover of several districts by outside entities and reforms initiated by mayors. (Contains 11 references.) (RJM)

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New Patterns of School Governance

By Ron Renchler

School governance has long been a political football, as local, state, and federal stakeholders work—sometimes cooperatively and sometimes at odds—to establish or influence policy and then implement accountability measures to track the quality of schools in the United States.

Proponents of change have recently recommended a number of new approaches—and variations on old ones—to meet the complex challenge of improving public education through different forms of school governance. However, as with change in any organizational setting, resistance has been strong, and the public debate on the appropriateness of new models for school governance continues.

This Digest explains why public-school governance is the subject of increasing scrutiny, identifies who is held accountable for results in the current governance system, and describes several recent proposals for transforming governance structures.

Why Are Changes in School Governance Being Recommended?

Most of the past decade's education reforms were initiated at the state or the school level, bypassing or ignoring the school board and district office. Now reformers are zeroing in on this neglected middle level of governance, hoping that some changes—perhaps a redefinition of the role of school boards, closer teamwork between board and superintendent, or experimentation with new governance structures—will indirectly stimulate improved performance at the school and classroom.

The latest round of debate about the most effective models for school governance was precipitated by the publication in November 1999 of *Governing America's Schools: Changing the Rules*, a report issued by the National Commission on Governing America's Schools and sponsored by the Education Commission of the States.

The commission's report documents the variety of performance standards by which American schools are being judged. Especially problematic has been the issue of lagging performance among minority students and students in urban areas.

Although there is little quantitative evidence that governance structures affect student academic achievement, more people seem willing to experiment with altering those structures in the hope that the changes will stimulate educators and students to perform at a higher level.

As Kirst and Bulkley (2000) note, "reformers will continue to use governance and organizational changes in an effort to improve the performance of education, even though these mechanisms may offer an indirect and uncertain strategy for improving classroom instruction."

Who's Accountable in the Governance System?

Much of the discussion of governance focuses on the sometimes rocky relationships among teachers, principals, superintendents, and school boards. The implication is that poor school performance won't be adequately addressed until these groups work together as a team.

Some critics blame the system itself and call for systemic change, while others favor workarounds to the current system, such as vouchers, school-choice programs, and privatization. Moreover, states differ so widely in their educational governance structures that it is difficult to prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution. A brief list of modern-day governance interest groups includes mayors, unions, business leaders, politicians, and community leaders, in addition to teachers, principals, superintendents, and school boards (National Commission).

Superintendents, especially in urban districts, have taken more than their fair share of the blame for the weaknesses in current school governance systems. Firing the superintendent is usually the first step in addressing governance problems, but this response seems only to have contributed to a high turnover rate and "has often hindered efforts to improve schools" (Johnston 2000).

School boards are the other traditional targets in the school governance blame game. Numerous observers have been critical of school boards and their role in public education, especially the way they interact with school superintendents (Carver 2000, Dawson and Quinn 2000, Edwards 2000, McAdams and Urbanski 1999).

A report by the Educational Research Service and the New England School Development Council (Goodman and Zimmerman 2000) notes that "too many state laws require or allow boards to engage in the operational detail of a school system," such as hiring staff and adopting textbooks. State laws should limit the board's role to policymaking, assign day-to-day operations to the superintendent, and, most important, says the report, empower board and superintendent to function as a unified leadership team.

What Did the ECS Commission Recommend?

Recognizing the political and administrative realities of school governance, the National Commission on Governing America's Schools recommended, without preference, one of two forms of governance: "(1) a system of publicly authorized, publicly funded and *publicly operated schools*, based on some of the more promising trends within the prevailing system of public education governance, and (2) a system of publicly authorized, publicly funded and *independently operated schools*, based on some of the more promising alternatives to the prevailing system of public education governance."

The first recommendation extends

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current governance structures to include a few experimental strategies. the second recommendation effectively argues for increased privatization of school governance.

Writing in *Education Week*, two commission members, Donald R. McAdams and Adam Urbanski (1999), provide different views on the issues raised by the report. McAdams argues that a system of independently operated schools—the second option in the commission's report—would allow school boards to "govern more and manage less." He believes that if schools were run by "individual nonprofit and for-profit organizations, cooperatives, sole proprietorships, and the like," boards would be free of the need to focus on the details of how schools are run and instead could "set standards, provide resources, and demand results."

Urbanski favors the first option—keeping schools publicly operated and improving current governance structures. He believes decentralized governance structures would allow changes at the classroom level, where "faculty, staff, and parents in each community and at each school would have greater authority and capacity to tailor the teaching and learning methods to meet high standards as well as the unique needs of their students."

What Other School Governance Models Have Been Proposed?

A few economically based strategies for changes in school governance have been proposed since the publication of the commission's report. Wang and Walberg (1999) recommend a system of governance whereby states and local boards would create basic standards that schools could devise their own ways to meet.

Thereafter, the authors say, schools would be free from "operational regulation or close supervision." Schools that failed to meet the standards would have a set of educational "best practices" imposed upon them. Continued failure to meet standards would call for a clean sweep of staff or complete school closure, "in which case… students could be given scholarships to attend nearby public or private schools." Thus, all schools, public or private, would essentially become entrepreneurial enterprises. "Let schools set their own goals, standards, curricula, and character," the authors suggest. "Let competition for students decide which is best."

A strategy for school governance with a business mold has been made popular in the recent work of John Carver (2000), whose Policy Governance model assigns the school superintendent a role parallel to that of the corporate CEO. Carver says the role of the school board is "to govern the system, rather than run it." He claims that school boards have traditionally micromanaged the educational process, something that would spell doom for any manager in a business setting.

A radical redesign of the function of school boards, Carver explains, would include (1) a focus on educational results rather than on the methods by which they were achieved, (2) newly defined relationships with the general public and parents, and (3) a commitment on the part of the board to speak with one voice rather than as a group of individuals with individual agendas.

Changing or improving the relationship between the superintendent and school board looms large in almost all proposals for different governance structures. Edwards (2000), a school board member in Illinois for many years, suggests a form of governance that "takes the decision-making power out of the hands of the few (the board) and places it into the hands of many (parents, teachers, administrators, and community members)." Edwards puts the locus of control at the building level. "How absurd," Edwards notes, "to perpetuate a system in which orders are handed down to educators from a board composed of people, who, by and large, are not educators."

Have Any Changes Already Taken Place?

Dawson and Quinn (2000), partners in a leadership development consulting firm, put Carver's Policy Governance model to the test in several districts in Colorado. In describing the experiences of their clients, the authors report that the school boards were better able to focus on policy issues and that superintendents were better able to carry out the day-to-day operations for which they were responsible.

Notable among recent developments in school governance has been the takeover of several districts by outside entities when schools fail to make adequate progress on their own. For a variety of reasons, these takeovers have occurred mostly in urban districts (Anderson and Lewis 1997).

Kirst and Bulkley (2000) describe the recent mayoral takeovers of several urban districts, including Chicago, Boston, Detroit, and Cleveland. Whether mayors can successfully become educational leaders remains an open question, and the effect of mayoral control on overall school performance will certainly be difficult to document.

Cibulka (2000) concludes that "public school educators may help to reshape the institution by their willingness to experiment with new institutional forms, but they are unlikely to preserve the 'one best system' as we have known it." He notes that "resistance to change" in old structures "is likely to further weaken the institution's capacity to achieve its goals, and to maintain its legitimacy and survival."

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